

EPA will propose putting CFAC on Superfund list

By RICHARD HANNERS Hungry Horse News | Posted: Wednesday, March 18, 2015 9:40 am

The Environmental Protection Agency plans to propose the Columbia Falls Aluminum Company smelter site for placement on the federal Superfund's National Priorities List this March.

EPA Region 8 administrator Shaun McGrath presented this news to Gov. Steve Bullock in a March 4 letter. In response to strong local interest by residents, businesses and watchdog groups, Bullock had requested in a Feb. 17 letter that the site be placed on the NPL.

"I am pleased to report that we expect to propose the site for listing when the next NPL update is published in the Federal Register, currently scheduled for March 2015," McGrath told the governor. "After the close of a 60-day comment period, the EPA will make a final listing decision after considering all comments received."

The aluminum smelter shut down completely in October 2009, and public interest in getting the site cleaned up swelled last year. Representatives from the Montana Department of Environmental Quality described the pros and cons of having the site put on the Superfund cleanup list during public meetings last year.

Glencore, however, the Swiss-based global commodities trading company that owns the CFAC site, announced in December 2014 that it had broken off cleanup talks with the DEQ.

Citizens, interest groups and the city of Columbia Falls wrote to Bullock and Sen. Jon Tester asking that the CFAC site be placed on the Superfund list, hoping that the EPA could get the remediation process started.

Spokesman Haley Beaudry said the company strongly opposed placing the site on the NPL, and corporate secretary Cheryl Driscoll wrote to Bullock outlining the reasons. They claimed the listing would slow down the cleanup process and taint the site's reputation for future economic development. They also said a hired consultant, Roux Associates, was already drafting a remedial investigation feasibility study for the site.

Tester wrote to EPA administrator Gina McCarthy on Jan. 8 urging her to join with Bullock in putting the closed smelter site on the Superfund list. Tester said he was "deeply troubled" by Glencore's decision to withdraw from cleanup negotiations with DEQ.

In his Feb. 17 letter to McGrath, Bullock said he was "concerned that if this issue remains unaddressed, the contamination from the site is serious enough to pose long-term risks to the community and to Montana's environment, including the Flathead River."

Bullock also asked that the EPA work with the DEQ and local communities, employ local contractors, periodically test nearby residential wells for contaminants, and consider redevelopment needs when evaluating cleanup needs.

“The EPA shares the interests outlined in your letter,” McGrath replied, addressing each of the governor’s concerns one by one. “The community’s interest in the site is evident from the public meetings held in 2014.”

Bullock also received a letter from Rep. Ryan Zinke, Montana’s lone congressman, expressing opposition to placing the CFAC site on the Superfund list. Zinke presented the same arguments as Beaudry and Driscoll, and he applauded Glencore’s plans for the smelter site.

“CFAC has taken the initiative to make this revitalization a reality,” Zinke said. “Their plan to expeditiously and effectively complete the Columbia Falls aluminum site investigation is in Montana’s best interests.”